DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 476 040 CE 084 930

AUTHOR	Barlas, Carole
TITLE	Learning-Within-Relationship as Context and Process in Adult Education: Impact on Transformative Learning and Social Change Agency.
PUB DATE	2001-06-00
NOTE	8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Adult Education Research Conference (42nd, Lansing, MI, June 1-3, 2001).
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/2001/2001barlas.htm.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adoption (Ideas); Adult Development; Adult Education; *Adult Learning; Case Studies; *Change Agents; Consciousness Raising; Critical Thinking; Doctoral Programs; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Relationship; Interviews; Learning Experience; *Learning Processes; Learning Theories; Participation; Self Concept; *Social Change; *Transformative Learning
IDENTIFIERS	Identity Formation; Impact Studies; Reflective Thinking

ABSTRACT

The impact of adult learning-within-relationship on transformative learning and social change agency was explored in a descriptive case study of the learning experiences of 20 adults who identified themselves as significantly transformed by their participation in a doctoral program. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to identify the learning processes and conditions that facilitated the changes acknowledged by the learners. A cross-case content analysis of the interviews revealed the following major themes: (1) transformation and identity; (2) learning-within-relationship; and (3) linking personal transformation to transformation in social change actions. The interviews demonstrated how learning-within-relationship emerges from and underscores nearly every learning experience recounted by the study participants and how it illuminated learning with others as both context and process as a key factor in critical reflection and transformative learning. The following key themes emerged as characterizing the context and process of learning within relationship: (1) relationships across differences of ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and class that challenged existing frames of reference; (2) acknowledging and working with affect, compassion, and trust; (3) the role of the unique relationship between participant/learner and teacher; and (4) application of learners' new ways of knowing and learning to interactions in their social worlds. (Contains 18 references.) (MN)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 476 040

Learning-within-Relationship as Context and Process in Adult Education: Impact on Transformative Learning and Social Change Agency

Carole Barlas
California Institute of Integral Studies

Abstract: *This paper presents one major finding from a broader set of findings encompassed in a doctoral dissertation. The study describes the learning experiences of twenty adults who identified themselves as significantly transformed by their participation in a doctoral program in transformative learning. This result describes and explores the impact of learning within the context of relationship on how adults changed their basic assumptions about themselves and the way they act in their social worlds.*

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Adult education has a distinguished tradition of fostering emancipatory processes. The challenge becomes to find learning processes that help develop the type of thinking in individuals and groups that critically examines social inequities and disparities between democratic principles and undemocratic realities in order to transform existing knowledge and social structures (Kegan, 1994; Shor, 1992). Creating a context that supports learning-within-relationship processes can facilitate adult learners' ability to reflect critically on social and political issues and to take effective action to free themselves and others from deterministic forms of existence (Freire, 1970; hooks 1994; Shor, 1992).

Peter Jarvis (1987) writes about the social context of adult learning and says " [L]earning is not just a psychological process that happens in splendid isolation from the world in which the learner lives, but it is intimately related to that world and affected by it (p. 11)." Social critical theorist and educator Phyllis Cunningham (1992) argues that personal transformation cannot occur separately from social transformation, that there is a dialectic process between thought and action.

I wish to advise the reader that while learning-within-relationship is an expanding and shifting concept, I use the term here to describe a contextual learning "field" in which long-held frames of reference can be examined and altered, and from which new actions can be taken. There is an emerging discussion in the literature regarding adult learners constructing knowledge jointly, in the context of relationship (Kasl & Elias, 2000; Saltiel, Sgroi, & Brockett, 1998).

Study Site

The site of this study is an innovative adult transformative learning and change program in a small graduate school. This program challenges higher education's valorization of rational learning processes and makes the premise that learning from experience is a holistic process that includes the affective and symbolic domains, as well as the intellect. This integral approach includes such contexts and processes as a diverse learning community extending over three years; in-depth and affect-laden sharing of personal stories and subsequent group reflection; engagement in multiple modes of knowing and whole-person learning; group discourse on the interrelationship between social/cultural context, learning, and knowledge production.

CE 069 930

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

C. Barlas

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Methods

This qualitative research is a descriptive case study of twenty self-selected individuals who believe that their experiences in this learning and change graduate program have significantly affected both their personal growth and their actions as facilitators of social transformation. The research was designed to answer the following: What kinds of changes were effected in these learners? What are the learning processes and conditions that facilitated these changes? How do these changes affect the way these learners engage in transforming their social worlds?

The data were gathered by using in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews that were taped, transcribed, and coded for themes. A cross-case content analysis using the constant comparative method was used. The analysis of the data involved rich description and identified emerging patterns that facilitate an understanding of this phenomenon.

Findings

The study discovered and described three major themes: Transformation and Identity, Learning-Within-Relationship, and Linking Personal Transformation to Transformation in Social Change Actions. The theme that is the subject of this paper, learning-within-relationship, emerges from and underscores almost every learning experience recounted by the study participants. It illuminates learning with others as both context and process as a key factor in critical reflection and transformative learning. Four key themes emerged that characterize the context and processes of learning-within-relationship.

Relationships across Differences of Ethnicity, Race, Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Class that Challenged Existing Frames of Reference

Learners were invited to bring their whole selves as psychologically, socially, and culturally complex individuals into their learning events as they shared their everyday life experiences during the cohort weekends. In doing do, they generated a compassionate and trusting context that helped to open them to diverse perspectives on common issues. They engaged in learning processes that helped create a context in which learners could challenge existing frames of reference and the validity and appropriateness of their own ideas and actions and those of others. As a result of interactive processes during cohort weekends, Melissa, a European-American, discovered her distorted perspectives about what her social location means in a racially structured society. "My understanding of racism has shifted. . . the 'right way' to do things is very much about the white conscious[ness] norms . . . which I never questioned and [it] never even occurred to me that they were there." Meaning-making became a process that took into account multiple dimensions of culture and difference.

Building safe and trusting relationships in the cohort across differences allowed these learners to feel discomfort around diverse perspectives and yet remain engaged in learning. They indicated that they learned by reflecting on the value of the discomfort. Judy, in telling of an uncomfortable and emotional engagement with a "white male Republican" in her cohort, noted that his views "didn't meet with progressive views in the room" but "his presence helped me to try to include all perspectives and not just to take a liberal point of view." During her cohort learning experiences, Karen, an African-American woman, in deepening her capacity to examine her frames of reference, found that she had "held white people as very one-dimensional, maybe two, but definitely not three. So, I think by having those interactions with people [in the cohort]... I really got to start seeing white people as people."

Acknowledging and Working with Affect, Compassion, and Trust

These findings demonstrate that intense emotional content of learning experiences served powerfully to trigger reflective learning by directing focus on assumptions that underlie frames of reference. Affect played two important roles in supporting and stimulating learning: the compassionate support that the members of the cohort gave to one another during emotionally charged encounters, and the role of facilitator/teacher in recognizing the value of affect in learning. Robert speaks about an incident that involved a learning process that focused on the exploration of different worldviews between European-Americans and people of color in his cohort. These interactions sometimes evoked anger, confusion, and anxiety and he "felt like we were risking everything.... that it could threaten the very container that we had built for the group." He goes on to say, " to hang together through those times, something good always follows. Developing trust allows us to continue going to the deep and dark places, the conflictive places." This growing sense of trust and safety facilitated more open and authentic communication and enabled a deeper level of meaning-making. Perin notes that, "in spite of our differences something is holding us together...I think it is our mutual love and respect for each other." She goes on to say "I have to trust another person's reality. Just because you and I don't agree right now doesn't mean that my reality is the true one and yours isn't. That leads to trying to understand what your realities are, what you are feeling."

Sometimes tensions arose in discussions in which learners would strongly advocate their particular cultural or gender perspective. Faculty acknowledged and facilitated the exploration of these tensions. Teresa, speaking about one of her faculty, Louann, notes that, "again she modeled someone wanting to live out of a higher level of consciousness. I would say just being loved and cared about, and well thought about by people like her [faculty] was so important to our learning."

Role of the Unique Relationship Between the Participant/Learner and the Teacher

The learners found that the teacher-learner relationship supported their transformative learning process through such contextual elements as faculty support of learning as a learner-centered endeavor, emotional support, inclusiveness, teacher as mentor, and teacher as co-learner. This study found that the core faculty of the cohort learning program created a learning environment that facilitated the integration of the students' social and cultural life experiences with their cohort learning experiences. Perin notes, "I think it was the respect from the teachers that I felt. I did not feel that they thought that I knew nothing and that they were there to teach me [everything]. It was very strongly a case of 'you have something to offer here too.'"

The students felt valued and feeling valued contributed to a sense of self-esteem and empowerment and created a ground from which they were able to take risks and grow. This sense of empowerment supported them in developing their capacities to critically question previously held worldviews and to alter the ways they engaged in their social worlds.

Application of the Learners' New Ways of Knowing and Learning to Interactions in their Social Worlds

These learners developed or deepened a sense of social agency that was manifested through the relational contexts and processes of their multicultural learning environment. They developed this sense of agency by reflecting critically and discovering that knowledge is constructed through the relationship between their personal lives and the social and cultural contexts within which they live. They found that the outcomes of their transformative learning

became personally meaningful and socially worthwhile as they connected their newly discovered insights to their lifeworlds. Judy, a European-American, serves on an "all-white" board of an agency for families-at-risk who are often "culturally diverse and generally very poor." When the board was discussing plans for a parenting class she "raise[d] the issue of 'what language is going to be done in'" as she "notice[s] that I can now be a voice on the board to raise issues that may have not come up previously."

They began to apply a deeply held understanding of transformation theory to their social interactions. They invited diverse perspectives into work and social activities and were able to create alternative actions based on their capacities to critically reflect, alter, and integrate their own perspectives and those of others. Melissa, a business consultant, has shifted from "it's got to be done this way" to "let me get input from everybody and make sure I have something that everybody is going to agree with in the end."

Conclusions/Discussion

This study suggests that a learning context that includes socially and culturally diverse learners and involves intensive, extended time together can foster the capacity in these learners to think critically about and challenge oppressive political and social situations. Although the impact of diversity on transformative learning is clearly demonstrated by the experiences of these participants, there is not much discussion regarding this in the empirical literature. Mezirow (1991) alluded to the impact of differences when he posited that transformative learning occurs when meaning is restructured as adults encounter experiences which challenge their current meaning perspectives and worldviews. Fritjof Capra (1996), writing from a systems perspective, points to the essential importance of diversity in learning to adapt to changing situations. He explains that a more diversified and complex network enables many different relationships and approaches to problem solving and learning. There is an enrichment of both the individual and the whole community.

In their long-term study of people who had committed to work for the common good over an extended period of time, Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, (1996) found that constructive engagement with the Other gave people the opportunity to know cultures as systems and therefore to see their interrelatedness. Kegan (1994) says when we learn to create a relationship to relationship we can resist our propensity to insist that what is well known to us is right or true, and that to which we are unaccustomed is wrong or invalid. We can re-evaluate our belief systems imposed upon us by our cultural systems rather than be held captive by them as we develop our own meaning systems and worldviews.

Participating in a learning environment into which the diversity of the whole self was invited provided the learners with the experience of inclusivity. Experiencing multiple ways of knowing and multiple ways of being during various cohorts' learning-within-relationship activities fostered a desire to bring this concept into the way they engaged in their workplaces and communities. Whole-person learning experiences (imaginal, somatic, affective, as well as intellectual) and conceptualizing differences as resources contributes to learners' capacities to include the whole personhood of the individual, both their own and those that they encounter, in their social interactions. The concepts of inclusive and whole-person learning environments as contexts for learning transformatively are supported in the literature (Kasl & Elias, 2000; Tisdell, 1995; Shor, 1992).

As these learners developed a deeper understanding of the relationship between context and learning through face-to-face engagement with each other, they began to view themselves as

individuals who have been and continue to be socially and discursively constructed. They learned that critically reflecting on long-held frames of reference as they engaged in their everyday lives engendered an increased awareness of how political interests and power structures limit the emancipatory potential in human relationships. This led many of the respondents to take actions in their workplaces, communities and personal relationships that contribute to transforming social structures that perpetuate unjust and oppressive practices. Learning-within-relationship, as it affects shifts in perspectives, is a dynamic context and process that learners can bring into the way they actively interface with their social worlds to foster social change.

Two important insights that this subject study provides that are not often discussed in the literature are the primary role of learners compassionately supporting each others' emotional states, and the role of facilitator/teacher in recognizing the value of affect in learning. These learners found that in learning-within-relationship, emotion can act as an important catalyst to triggering reflective learning and fostering transformative learning and action. Brookfield (1986) and Mezirow (1991), while describing critical incidents as one type of catalyst to transformative learning, focus on rational critical reflection and only lightly touch on the emotional states and how affect impacts critical reflection and learning. However, there are an increasing number of studies on the practice and theory of transformative learning that confirm the importance of discussing and processing emotions and feelings, both as a precursor to critical reflection and as a stimulus for critical reflection and perspective transformation. (Barlas, 2000; Coffman, 1989; Neuman, 1996; Sveinunggaard, 1993).

Building a learning environment that supports a culture of caring, trust, and safety creates a space into which learners can bring their unique life experiences. Through processes of disclosure, they can develop caring and empathy for each other that foster emotional as well as curricular support. This empathy and caring in turn facilitates learning-within-relationship through deepening the appreciation of multiple perspectives and differences (Saavedra, 1996)). This contextual condition of the learning environment can support processes of equal participation among groups of learners. Equal participation is central to emancipatory transformative learning (Brookfield, 1986; Mezirow, 1991; Shor, 1992; Tisdell, 1995).

The unique relationship between the participant/learner and the teacher can create fertile ground from which learners are able to take risks. The interpersonal interactions among the learners and teachers in this study fostered transformative learning experiences that contributed to the learners' altered sense of identity and changes in the ways they act. Facilitation has a powerful impact on how learners develop and on what they learn (Daloz et al, 1996; Brookfield, 1986; Tisdell, 1995).

These learners used their lives as text and discovered through the context and processes of learning-within-relationship that both the immediate context of the cohort setting and the larger social and political context impacted how and what they learned. An experientially developed understanding of learning-within-relationship fostered the ability of these learners to create alternative actions based on their capacities to critically reflect upon, alter, and integrate multiple perspectives. Shared inquiry into underlying assumptions and premises can contribute to a fundamental reframing of the nature and structure of engagement in social change actions (Cunningham, 1993; Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992). These learners became aware of what choices they had about how to interact transformatively with their social worlds to foster social change. Human agency has the potential to resist inequality and to change structures.

Implications

If one of the purposes of adult education is to foster emancipatory learning, the results of this study may contribute to a more in-depth understanding of learning-within-relationship and its impact on facilitating personal and social transformation. Understanding learning-within-relationship as both context and process for adult learning could have wide-reaching practical and theoretical implications not only in the classroom, but in educational institutions, in communities, and in the workplace as well.

References

Barlas, Carole. (2000). *Towards a changing paradigm: Transformative learning and social change action.* Ph.D. dissertation. California Institute of Integral Studies

Brookfield, S. D. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. San Francisco : Jossey-Bass.

Capra, F. (1996). *The Web of Life: A new scientific understanding of living systems.* New York: Anchor Books.

Coffman, P. M. (1991). Inclusive language and perspective transformation. *Proceedings of the 32nd Adult Education Research Conference.* Norman: University of Oklahoma.

Cunningham, J. M., Hart, M., Dirkx, P., & Scott, S. (1993). Conceptions of transformation in adult education: View of self, society, and social change. *Proceedings of the 34th Annual Adult Education Research Conference* (pp. 354-361). University Park: Pennsylvania State University.

Daloz, L. A., Keen, C. H., Keen, J. P., & Parks, S. D. (1996). *Common fire: Lives of commitment in a complex world.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Freire, P. (1970,). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Continuum.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress.* New York: Routledge.

Jarvis, P. (1987). *Adult learning in the social context.* London: Croom Helm.

Kasl, E. & Elias, D. (2000). Creating new habits of mind in small groups. In Jack Mezirow (Ed.), *Transformative adult learning.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Neuman, T. P. (1996). *Critically reflective learning in a leadership development context.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Saavedra, E. (1996). Teachers study groups: Contexts for transformative learning and action. *Theory into Practice, 35*: 271-277.

Saltiel, I. M., Sgroi, A., & Brockett, R. G. (1998). The Power and potential of collaborative learning partnerships. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 79.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Shor, Ira. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sveinunggaard, K. (1993). Transformative learning in adulthood: A socio-contextual perspective. *Proceedings of the 35th Adult Education Research Conference* (pp. 275-280). University Park: Pennsylvania State University.

Tisdell, E. J. (1995). *Creating inclusive adult learning environments: Insights from multicultural education and feminist pedagogy* (ERIC Monograph Information Series No. 361). Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education.

BARLAS

ERIC REPRODUCTION RELEASE FORM

I. Document Identification

Title: LEARNING-WITHIN-RELATIONSHIP AS CONTEXT AND PROCESS IN ADULT EDUCATION: IMPACT ON TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AND SOCIAL CHANGE AGENCY

Author(s): CAROLE BARLAS, Ph.D.

Date of Publication: JUNE, 2001

II. Reproduction Release

A. Timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community are announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, Resources in Education (RIE). Documents are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) or other ERIC vendors. Credit is given to the source of each document. If reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

Level 1

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY: CAROLE BARLAS

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Level 2A

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY:

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Level 2B

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY:

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)." Note: The above lines do NOT have to be signed by the person submitting the document. A signature is required below to place the document in the database if it is accepted.

B. If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign the release.

✓ Permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) and paper copy (Level 1).

Permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only (Level 2A).

Permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only (Level 2B).

Documents will be processed as indicated provided quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

C. "I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated.
Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other that ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for nonprofit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquires."

Name: CAROLE BARLAS, Ph. D

Signature: Carole Barlas, Ph. D

Organization:

Position:

Address: 40 SUNNY HILL DR.
PETALUMA, CA

Zip Code: 94952

Telephone No: 707-763-0221

BARLAS

Fax: 707 763 0346

E-mail: barlas40@earthlink.net

Date: 3/11/03

III. Document Availability Information —

(Non-ERIC Source)

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:

Address:

Price Per Copy:

Quantity Price:

IV. Referral to Copyright/Reproduction Rights Holder

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:

Address:

Zip Code: